Gosh, I'm Tongue-tied!: Chang-rae Lee's Revelation of Asian American Male Difficulty

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Synopsis: Chang-rae Lee is one of the new flag-bearers of Asian American Literature, whose male protagonists are strikingly unconventional: well-off, well-educated, decent and sensitive, and always loved and pursued by perfect white women. However, they are tongue-tied, unable to articulate their emotions when they should; and deep in their souls, they wish to be invisible, even transparent. This article tries to examine such new dimensions of Lee's Asian American male figures, arguing that "silence," once attributed solely to female counterparts, is not precisely a patent for Asian American women. It also discusses that Chang-rae Lee's vision and mission as a writer is beyond Asian American.

1. Introduction

Asian American Literature is a relatively new genre, but for a long time in its rather short history, it has been noticeably female-dominant. Renowned vanguards are such as Amy Tann, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, and more recently, Jhumpa Lahiri. In fact, Fukuko Kobayashi writes at the beginning of the chapter about Asian American Literature in her recent book as follows: "[. . .] what should be noted is the fact that this notably growing 'new literary genre' is mainly operated by women writers" (translation mine) (149). Of course there exist male figures, too, who are both well known and influential: Frank Chin, John Okada, Toshio Mori, and David Henry Hwang, to name a few. Still, many critics and readers share the impression that in Asian American Literature, female voice is more audible than male counterpart.

Then, Chang-rae Lee enters the scene—a young and brilliant male

writer and scholar of Korean origin. This Yale graduate, raised in a fancy suburb on the east coast is, so to speak, an Asian American thoroughbred. His debut novel, *Native Speaker* (1995), received more than eight honors and prizes including the American Book Award for First Novels and the Pen/Hemingway Award. *Time* magazine named this novel one of the Year's Best Books. His second, *A Gesture Life* (1999), was also highly reviewed and award-winning, taking the Anisfield-Wolf Literary Award and the Asian American Book Award among others. Chang-rae Lee was also named as one of the twenty best American writers under forty by the *New Yorker*. He is currently teaching creative writing at Princeton University.

No doubt he is a young and promising Asian American writer. His arrival on the Asian American literary scene has provided not only a rather scarce example of Asian American male voice but the chance of revising the common image of Asian American male experience. This article will try to articulate how unconventional Lee's Asian American male protagonists are, and what aspects he tries to foreground in his early two works, *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*.

2. Silence in *Native Speaker*

Lee was born in Korea in 1965, and immigrated to the United States with his parents when he was at the age of three. Thus he is, what we call, a one-point-five generation Korean American, whose first language is definitely English. His family settled in Westchester, New York, where his father practiced as a successful psychiatrist. Finishing Philips Exeter Academy, a prestigious prep school, he entered Yale University majoring in English. After the graduation he worked for one year as a stock analyst on Wall Street, but then, choosing to pursue his literary passion rather than utilizing his economic skill, he proceeded to undertake a graduate course in fine arts at University of Oregon and got a master's degree there. His first teaching position was at City Uni-

versity of New York's Hunter College, where he directed the program of Master of Fine Arts. Then, in 2002, he was welcomed at Princeton University, and now serves as the director of Princeton's program in creative writing.

As one can imagine, given these backgrounds, Lee's writings are no longer typical immigrant elegies. Of course there exist difficulties, sadness, and struggles as newcomers, but his male protagonists are fairly well-off, well-educated, always decent, and strikingly attractive like the author himself. Indeed they are far from the common image of Asian American men, leaving no trace of Charlie-Chan, Fu Manchu, or Mr. Kato. Charming and successful as they are, still they have their own, deep-rooted queerness. They are tongue-tied, and cannot express their emotions.

This tradition of Lee's starts in his first novel, *Native Speaker,* rather straightforwardly, and then in his second, *A Gesture Life,* more deviously and complicatedly. Henry Park, the protagonist of his first novel, is a Korean American young man whose position in life, as well as sensitivity, naturally wraps over that of the author. Also, the entire story is written in the first person. Thus, *Native Speaker* is considered the most "conventional" ethnic voice among Lee's three novels: ethnic minorities speak out about their sad and difficult situations autobiographically.

Although Henry is a smart and well-educated young Korean man, at the beginning of the story he is deeply disturbed. His wife has just left him leaving a mysterious note behind, a list of who her husband is.

> You are surreptitious/ B+ student of life/ first thing hummer of Wagner and Strauss/ illegal alien/ emotional alien/ genre bug/ Yellow peril: neo-American/ great in bed/ overrated/ poppa's boy/ sentimentalist/ anti-romantic/ ___ analyst (you fill in)/ stranger/ follower/ traitor/ spy (NS 5)

Obviously Henry and his wife Lelia, a white American with Italian origin, have a problem. Some time ago they lost their only son, aged seven, in a very unfortunate accident. Certainly the loss is huge, but what disturbs Lelia greatly and makes her leave her husband is not the death of their beloved son itself but Henry's silence.

> "You haven't said his [their son's] name more than four or five times since it happened. You haven't said his name tonight. Maybe you've talked all this time with Jack [Henry's colleague] about him, maybe you say his name in your sleep, but we've never really talked about it, we haven't really come right out together and said it, really named what happened for what it was." (NS 129)

Henry, too, knows the point and introspects, "When real trouble hits, I lock up. I can't work the trusty calculus. I can't speak. I sit there, unmoved. For a person like Lelia, who grew up with hollerers and criers, mine is the worst response. It must look as if I'm not even trying" (NS 158).

Indeed, Henry must seem to his wife as "emotional alien," as she lists in the note. In contrast with Henry's silence, Lelia can always articulate her thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Interestingly, her profession is a speech therapist who helps the children with language delay. Since the first time they met, Henry has been impressed by the way she speaks: how naturally and precisely she chooses her words. "And perhaps most I love this about, her helpless way, love it still, how she can't hide a single thing, that she looks hurt when she is hurt, seems happy when happy. [. . .] what else can move a man like me, who would find nothing as siren or comforting?" (NS 159).

As Lelia's candidness in verbal expressions results partly from her family background, being raised among "hollerers and criers" as Henry puts it, Henry's silent armor is also what he has learned to wear in his familial background, or has even inherited. Soon after the previous in-

trospection, Henry recalls his boyhood as follows:

> When I was a boy, I wouldn't join any school club or organization before a member first approached me. I wouldn't eat or sleep at a friend's house if it weren't prearranged. I never assumed anyone would be generous to me, or in any way helpful. I never considered it my right to expect approval or sanction no matter what good I had done. [. . .] So call me what you will. An assimilist, a lackey. A duteous foreign-faced boy. I have already been whatever you can say or imagine, every version of the newcomer who is always fearing and bitter and sad. (NS 160)

This is a sad recollection, but even sadder is the fact that he was always aware of the whole interaction he had been through. He knew what he should not expect, which were ever so many. In other words, Henry has acquired a typical attitude of Asian American model minority since his very early stage of life. Simply, he could not afford to be innocent or carefree even when he should have been.

A more direct process of learning to be inarticulate had also been going on: he was told to be silent, both by his father and mother. First Henry remembers his father's common saying: "*Nobody give you damn about your problem or pain,* he [Father] might say. *You just take care yourself. Keep it quiet*" (italics original) (NS 182). Henry's father is a tough first generation Korean immigrant who started his grocery business first at a stall, then at a shop, and then, at many successful shops in Manhattan. This attitude of not showing one's inner pain and just being quiet is partly an Asian tradition: any Asian father may tell his son to do so, and Henry's father himself might have been told by his father. However, it is also the product of Henry's father's harsh struggle in life as a newcomer.

His mother is also a typical Asian mother: obedient, quiet, and caring for her family more than anything. What she told to her son,

however, was almost shuddering. Henry recalls, "My mother said to me once that suffering is the noblest art, the quieter the better. If you bite our lip and understand that this is the only world, you will perhaps persist and endure" (NS 333). Her words also sound quite Asian, but the tone is much heavier and darker than that of her husband's. The sheer fact of being a woman—an Asian woman—must have provided her with additional occasions to learn such art. Thus she told her son to suffer nobly and quietly, and being a good son, he has ever kept his mother's words. When she died in her mid-age, both her husband and son suffered a lot, very quietly. Henry describes the days as saying, "We [Father and Henry] were intently inarticulate, competitively so" (NS 239).

Thus Henry's silence was formed partly by his parents' teaching and partly by the circumstances as an Asian newcomer. Ironically, for Henry, being silent was equal to being good, and actually, he has achieved to be very good. Rather self-derisively he analyses himself: "To send people away or else allow them to go, that what is most noble to me is the exquisite gift of silence. My mask of serenity and repose" (NS 296). Now Henry is sending his wife away, or allowing her to leave him. He knows that is not what he wants, but knows not what he should do otherwise. The cue of his change is one day given by his colleague Jack.

> You were well raised. You have a keen sense of accommodation. This is clear. You understand respect and distance and separateness. Fine things. But someplace in your life you let them go too far. Too far for any more good to come of them. The result is foregone. (NS 164)

The ending of *Native Speaker* is rather calm and serene. Lelia comes back and starts working again as a speech therapist. Henry quits his job and serves as an assistant to his wife. Incidentally, Henry's former job was as a spy, as listed in the end of Lelia's note, though it was neither adventurous nor bloody but the kind of information-oriented. Al-

though Lelia did not know exactly what Henry was doing, she suspected the nature of his vocation, which was precise and to the point.

Besides Henry's self analysis and transformation, many things happen in *Native Speaker*. For one thing, Henry's job as a spy is so complicated and ambivalent. In a sense, it is quite befitting for his character, but it also chokes him. Also explored is Henry's family history: his mother's death; the mourning process of father and son; and after that, their mysterious family life with a new housekeeper from Korea, who is also a surrogate wife to Henry's father. Despite the many years they live that way together, Henry does not even know her real name and keeps calling her just "aunty."

Indeed, *Native Speaker* is one artful novel: among plenty of metaphors, mysteries and secrets are being revealed gradually. Even more so is Lee's next work, *A Gesture Life*. In this novel, the protagonist is a "Japanese American" Doc Hata, with parentheses.

3. Transparence in *A Gesture Life*

As seen in the way he is called, Doc Hata is respected and appreciated in a decent neighborhood on the east coast.

> Whenever I step into a shop in the main part of the village, inevitably someone will say, "Hey, it's good Doc Hata." The sentiment, certainly, is very kind, and one I deeply appreciate. Here, fifty minutes north of the city, in a picturesque town that I call Bedly Run, I somehow enjoy an almost Oriental veneration as an elder. I suppose the other older folks who live here receive their due share of generosity and respect, but it seems I alone rate the blustery greeting, the special salutation. (GL 2)

Considering that he is the only Asian in the area where people tend to be rather exclusive, his well-acceptance sounds exceptional. In fact, Doc

Hata is not even a doctor; he used to run a small shop for medical supplies on the main street of the town for years, and recently sold the shop to a young couple and retired. He resides in the best part of the area in a beautiful Tudor style house which has long been a Naboth's vineyard among the local real estate agents. However, while he enjoys his present position in the community, he has a queer desire of being transparent, not being seen or heard. In his authentic swimming pool, he monologues:

> [. . .] when I was underneath the water, gliding in that black chill, my mind's eye suddenly seemed to carry to a perspective high above, from where I could see the exacting, telling shapes of all: the Spartan surfaces of the pool deck, the tight-clipped manicures of the garden, the venerable house and trees, the fetching, narrow street. And what caught me, too, was that I knew there was also a man in that water, amidst it all, a secret swimmer who, if he could choose, might always go silent and unseen. (underline mine) (GL 24)

Indeed, *A Gesture Life* is a story of this impeccable man of retirement age gradually looking back on his past and revealing the dark secrets that have made him desire to be invisible.

Although remaining single all his life, Doc Hata has adopted a Korean orphan girl, Sunny. He tries to do everything for her, as he does for anything else, but somehow he fails and Sunny, in her teens, becomes more and more uncontrollable. Mary Burns, a widow neighbor who has been in a relationship with Doc for years, once puts it as follows: "You are the one who wanted her. You adopted her. But you act almost guilty, as if she's someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you're obliged to do whatever she wishes, which is never good for anyone, much less child" (GL 60). As if rhyming with this statement from his girlfriend, his daughter says, "I never needed you. I don't know why, but you needed me. But it was never the other way" (GL 96). She also

accuses him, saying "[. . .] all I've ever seen is how careful you are with everything. With our fancy big house and this store and all the customers. How you sweep the sidewalk and nice-talk to the other shopkeepers. You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness" (GL 95). Truly, Doc Hata needed Sunny, in place of someone he thinks he hurt and betrayed. It is this hidden but profound feeling of guilt that has made him carry on "a whole life of gestures and politeness," wishing to be ever silent and unseen.

Meanwhile, one may conceive that those who wish to be invisible might be a little clumsy or plain. Doc Hata is never such. The author lets the fact become clear through the eye of Doc's girlfriend, Mary Burns:

> She [Mary] would later say I was gentle-seeming, and charming, and "exceedingly handsome," if I remember her words correctly. [. . .] And when she was even more comfortable with me, she confided how odd a recognition it was for her, at least at first, to find herself deeply attracted to an Oriental man. (GL 52)

Considering that Mary Burns herself is a beautiful and wealthy, as well as a virtuous and respectable white woman in the community, Doc Hata must be one Adonis. Also, as the latter part of her words suggests, he is way beyond the general image of "an Oriental man," just like Henry Park in *Native Speaker.*

Always being pleasant and tactful, handsome and attractive as well, Doc Hata never talks much about himself, which is also the case with Henry Park. Thus his retrospect goes on very slowly and windingly. Also, critics describe this novel as like *The Remains of the Day* (1989) by Kazuo Ishiguro: decent, serene, and reserved. Little by little, however, Doc approaches the core of his memory.

Born and raised in Japan, Doc Hata is not Japanese but Korean, a descendant of those who were brought to Japan as laborers and forced

to live in marginalized communities. Being exceptionally clever, he was adopted by the Kurohata, a childless Japanese couple, and has lived ever after as Japanese, hiding his true identity. During World War II, he was dispatched to the Burmese front as a medical soldier, where he was assigned to take care of the health and hygiene of Korean comfort women. Among them was a girl, whom he calls in his retrospect simply as K, with whom he fell in an impossible love in the extreme situations of the front, and to whom only he ever disclosed his true origin. The time they spent together was short. It ended with the death of K; she was slaughtered by the soldiers. It is near the end of the novel that Doc Hata finally reaches this atrocious memory.

> Yet I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic's work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitation of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfect cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part. (GL 305)

What he was gathering there were the remains of K's mutilated body, and what he discovered, miraculously whole, was a fetus in her body.

This image of an unborn baby haunts Doc Hata's life. Not only did he have to witness his beloved K's but also his daughter Sunny's. In her late teens Sunny ran away from home to live with her questionable African American boyfriend, and months later, she came back in total misery: she was pregnant, way too late for a normal abortion. Doc used his business connections and asked an obstetrician to perform the operation. Since it was an illegal procedure, they could not involve nurses: Doc volunteered to do the nurse's job in order to save his daughter. What he saw that evening at the clinic "endures, remaining unaltered,

preserved" (GL 345), he confesses. Then, he contemplates:

> [. . .] if in my life I've witnessed the most terrible of things, if I've seen what no decent being should ever look upon and have to hold in close remembrance, perhaps it means I should be left to the cold device of history, my likeness festooning the ramparts of every house and town and district of man. (GL 345)

The above notion might apply even truer for what he saw in the war-front. Possibly, when he says "if in my life I've witnessed the most terrible of things," what he means is not actually what he saw that evening at the operation table but decades ago in a Burmese battlefield. Be that as it may, these two scenes must have certainly been engraved at the deepest part of his soul. There is, however, one contrastive difference between the two. In the earlier occasion, he could not undo the destruction of the mother while the baby remained wholesome; years later, he dared to eliminate the baby in order to save the mother.

After the war, Doc Hata left his homeland forever and moved into the country against which he fought during the war. He does not reveal much about the reason nor how hard the early years used to be. He only says, "This may sound like an excuse, and perhaps even a little sad, but it's hard for others to know how consuming one's arrival in a new land can be, how it will take up every last resource of spirit, which too often can lead to the detriment of most everything else" (GL 48–9). Thus, in his new habitat, too, where nobody cares about his true identity, he adopts his familiar way to overcome difficulties and carries on "a gesture life." Truly, all through the years in the new land he takes up "every last resources of spirit" in this new mission, and as always, he executes it thoroughly.

Here again, he never articulates his feelings. He only discloses his secret desire to be invisible, as shown at the beginning of this chapter. However, while inevitably adopting a helpless Korean girl as his re-

demption for K, doing everything for her but yet failing her, and failing also in the relationship with Mary Burns, his inner crack becomes deeper and wider, to the level where he wishes not only to be invisible but to be swallowed in his own cleft and cease to exist. One day, again in water, but not in the swimming pool but in a bathtub this time, he feels the similar sensation:

> There is something exemplary to the sensation of near-perfect lightness, of being in a place and not being there, which seems of course a chronic condition of my life but then, too, its everyday unction, the trouble finding a remedy but not quite a cure, so that the problem naturally proliferates until it has become you through and through. Such is the case of my belonging, molding to whatever is at hand. So I dipped my head beneath the surface and could feel the water swell over the edge of the tub and onto the tiled floor but I didn't care. The intense heat felt so pure and truthful to me, so all -enveloping, that I wished there was a way I could remain within it, silently curled up as if I were quite unborn, as yet not out of this life, or of the world, of anything moored to the doings and traces of humankind. (underline mine) (GL 289–290)

No doubt he is haunted by the image of unborn babies; K's, Sunny's, and he himself. Unborn babies do not see, hear, nor talk. They also wish to be unseen and unheard, hiding under the bunting of perfect gestures. That is "a chronic condition" of Doc Hata's life. However, somewhere deep in his soul, all he has ever craved for is this: "All I wished for was to be part (if but a millionth) of the massing, and that I pass through with something more than a life of gestures" (GL 299).

In the last stages of his life, after the many days of recollections and contemplations, he finally reaches a small clue, in a time of devastation, again in water. Sunny, now in her late twenties, comes back to the area, with a decent job as a shop manager and an adorable little

son. First, the father-daughter relationship is awkward, but little by little, both sides learn to be close as a family. While Sunny works, Doc takes care of her son, Thomas. What the elderly man soon finds, and is astonished at, is the fact that it is a genuine joy for him, the kind he never has experienced before.

One day, when he brings Thomas to a public swimming pool, the boy narrowly escapes from drowning. Noticing the emergency, aging Doc immediately jumps into the water, which almost kills his vulnerable body after a recent illness. Doc never hesitates a moment. He knows that he has to save the child, the born one, this time. He makes it, but while everyone is involved in Thomas's situation, Renny, Doc's one-generation-younger friend who is also in the water to save Thomas, is suddenly stricken with a heart attack. Doc is determined, now he knows what to do for Renny, too.

> "Oh my God, he's dying," Liv [Renny's girlfriend] says, collapsing to her knees. "He's dying."
>
> I do not answer, not from fear that she is right but that I am so certain she is wrong, for there will be no dying for him today, I think, I cannot allow it—in the way a doctor, perhaps once or twice in his career, might not simply abide—and if I have to reach inside his chest I shall, reach inside and roughly clasp his heart and will it back alive. (GL 324)

All these years Doc has considered that K died "for him," and that guilty feeling has shut him out of any other true feelings. This day, however, he starts feeling again. He is determined to will back Renny's heart, will back his own life.

Doc Hata is still haunted by the traumatic past, and states, "Now of course I fear darker chance lies ahead for her [Sunny] and Thomas if I don't soon retract myself from their lives, that something terrible and final will befall them" (GL 333). At the same time, however, he con-

fesses:

> [. . .] I have never before quite felt the kind of modest, pure joy that comes from something like simply holding Thomas's hand as he leads us through some mall, or watching as he and Sunny orchestrate the pulling of a T-shirt over his head, his sturdy little arms stuck for a moment, wiggling with half-panic and half-delight. And it's not just these sightings, of course, that elevate me, but the naturally attendant hope of a familial continuation, an unpredictable, richly evolving *to be.* For what else but this sort of complication will prove my actually having been here, or there? What else will mark me, besides the never-to-be-known annals of the rest? (italics original) (GL 334)

At the last station of his life, Doc Hata comes to know that "a familial continuation, an unpredictable, richly evolving *to be,*" and such "sort of complication" is the only thing that proves his having been there. Here, very subtly and modestly though, he dares to choose *to be* there.

4. Sensitive and Tongue-tied: A new Asian American Maleness

As shown so far, Lee's two protagonists, Henry Park and Doc Hata, are highly comparable: they are intelligent, well-off, charming and sexy, but inarticulate with their emotions, which often results in great difficulty in their lives and relationships. In both cases, the cause of their silence is the harsh elements in their lives, and they never had much choice of being otherwise. However, one may also notice the difference of latitude of their difficulties. In the case of Doc Hata, the impediments he has to go through are not just one as an immigrant but many more: being a Korean born in Japan, disguising his true identity all his life, experiencing the extreme violence and insanity during the war, and

witnessing the last of K and the unborn babies. Because of these, Doc Hata's agony is prolonged, and he has to wait till his retirement age before some sort of reconciliation finally visits him.

Before the entrance of Chang-rae Lee, silence and inarticulateness have been the cliché for Asian American women. For example, in *Articulate Silences* (1993), King-kok Cheung asserts, by discussing Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogawa—all women writers—that in Eurocentric premises where a premium is placed on assertiveness in educational institutions and in society at large, "silence, too, can speak many tongues" (1). Here Cheung presupposes quite naturally that silence is attributed to women. The same composition applies to the analysis by Traise Yamamoto. In *Masking Selves, Making Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and The Body* (1999), she tries to answer her thesis, "How do they [Japanese American women] construct the self as subject within a society that constructs them as objects without agency?" (4). Yamamoto's focus is shed on Japanese—not Asian—American women, but her argument also clearly suggests that "masking selves" is the attribution of Asian "women" only, not men.

However, Asian male silence has not been a secret. In fact, Cheung notices the fact and testifies that "[. . .] men, too, must repress their emotions because of conventional definitions of manhood, especially in cultures that associate silence with fortitude" (28). Thus, silence is not exactly a patent for Asian women but rather for Asian in general. However, it has not been discussed on a literary scene because of the lack of proper evidences—voices or works by Asian American men—until Lee arrives on stage.

Before Chang-rae Lee, the common image of Asian males that appears in Asian American Literature is one represented in Elain Kim's article, entitled "Asian American Realities through Literature," in which she describes Hisaye Yamamoto's works between 1949 and 1961 as follows: "The focus is on the changing roles of women imprisoned with well-meaning but weak and insensitive husbands and on the bleakness and

isolation of rural toil. Ultimately the women are vanquished. The men are never condemned, but they remain in the shadows as guardians of the prison doors [. . .]" (204). Here is an image of Asian men as in-house dictators, or oppressors in the oppressed Asian community. The same icon is seen in works by Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and more recently, Rhana Reiko Rizzuto, among others. Surely, Lee's protagonists stand on a very different dimension: they are strikingly sensitive, never oppressing others except for themselves.

Another typical image of Asian males might be an emasculated one. This image might prevail more widely in mainstream cultures than among Asian American voices. Sheridan Prasso, a journalist who has been writing about Asia for more than fifteen years, testifies in her latest book, *The Asian Mystique* (2005), as follows: "With a few exceptions, Asian men on screen have been small, sneaky, and threatening-or spineless, emasculated wimps, or incompetents who may well be technically proficient in martial arts, but impotent when faced with white man's superior strength or firepower. Lacking machismo, they almost never get the girl" (103). King-kok Cheung also points out the fact, using a more mild wording: "[. . .] precisely because quietness is associated with the feminine, as is the 'East' in relation to the 'West' (in Orientalist disclosure), Asian and Asian American men too have been 'feminized' in American popular culture" (2). Here again, the sharp contrast lies between this conventional image and Lee's protagonists. They are "great in bed" (NS 5), "exceedingly handsome" (GL 52), and always make ideal white women crazy about them. In short, despite the fact that they are delicate and sensitive, they are far from being "feminized."

5. Beyond Asian American

So far discussed is the uniqueness of Chang-rae Lee's works as an Asian American male voice. At the closing of this article, however, let me add another perspective to appreciate his works. Although Lee is a

promising Asian American writer and scholar, as mentioned in the first chapter, his focus as a writer is beyond Asian American. He testifies in his interview on the *New York Times Book Review* about his ambition as a writer without using the words of Asian American: "I'm interested in people who find themselves in places, whether of their choosing or not, and who are forced to decide how best to live there. That feeling of both citizenship and exile, of always being an expatriate—with all the attendant problems and complications and delight" (20). In the online interview he states more specifically as follows:

> I think I'll write about lots of different people through the course of my career. At the moment I'm fascinated by people who find themselves in positions of alienation or some kind of cultural dissonance. The characters may not always be Asian Americans, but they will always be people who are thinking about the culture and how they fit or don't fit into it. That's one of the notions that I just keep exploring. ("Princeton Weekly Bulletin")

The above interview was made soon after Lee was welcomed to the faculty of Princeton in 2002, when he published his second work, *A Gesture Life,* three years prior, and was possibly writing his third, *Aloft* (2004). In fact, *Aloft* is not an Asian American story: the protagonist is an Italian American in his late fifties, whose Korean wife has been dead for years, whose father is dying in a nursery home, and whose son and daughter are also involved in their own problems. He is the one "who find themselves in positions of alienation," loves to fly in his small aircraft to escape from reality. As the author announced in the above interview, this time his characters are not Asian American.

About a decade ago, similar footsteps were taken by the two well-known writers of Asian origin—Joy Kogawa and Kazuo Ishiguro. The outcomes of the two, however, were quite contrastive. Kogawa's debut novel, Obasan (1983), is a lyrical autobiographical story of Japanese

American, which has become a bestseller both in Canada and the United States, receiving numerous awards including the National Book Award in the US. Her second book, *Itsuka* (1993), more or less a continuation of her first, has also been liked and well-reviewed by the critics and the general public. In her third, *The Rain Ascends* (1995), however, the author depicts a completely different world of white Christians. Unfortunately, the last one has not been welcomed as auspiciously as the ones before. Actually, it was almost ignored, and has been out-of-print for years. On the other hand, Ishiguro's similar foot-path was highly celebrated. His first and second works, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist in the Floating World* (1986) are full of Japanese motifs and both are well-reviewed and award-winning. However, the Booker Award, the highest literary honor of the United Kingdom, has fallen on his third, *The Remains of the Day,* which has no trace of Japanese-ness.

Chang-rae Lee may well have known these two examples of his predecessors. In any case, he chose to write his third novel in the same way—non-Korean—with clear intention. For the time being, *Aloft* has not received any kind of honors or awards. Reviews on this novel are varied, though there is one thing in common: critics mention, often more than once, that this is not a Korean story. No doubt, Lee is not as unfortunate as Kogawa, a Canadian writer, but certainly not as auspicious as British Ishiguro.

In *The Location of Culture,* Homi Bhabha writes, "What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1). Chang-rae Lee's attempt to write beyond Asian America is precisely the effort "to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities." Indeed, Lee is an excellent writer of Korean origin. The fact, however, does not redeem nor verify the general presumption that he should write about Korean immigrants or comfort women only. Theo-

retically that is true, as Homi Bhabha clearly advocates, but so far no one has actually crossed the borders and succeeded in American literary scene. Chang-rae Lee might be the first one, for both his ambition and talent as a writer is beyond Asian American.

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